

Laughter in university lectures

Nesi, Hilary

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Abstract

This paper analyses laughter in spoken academic discourse, with the aim of discovering why lecturers provoke laughter in their lectures. A further purpose of the paper is to identify episodes in British data which may differ from those in other cultural contexts where other lecturing practices prevail, and thus to inform the design of study skills and staff development programmes for multilingual, multicultural, international university environments. Examination of the data indicates that the management of laughter in British lectures is strategic, and has a rhetorical purpose. Six main types of laughter episode are described: 'teasing', 'lecturer error', self-deprecation', 'black humour', disparagement' and 'word play'. Laughter results from references to shared 'scripts' for student and lecturer behaviour, evaluations of outsiders who do not form part of the lecturer student in-group, and the lecturers' efforts to forge group intimacy. It serves as a means of maintaining social order, building rapport, relieving tension, and modelling academic and professional identities. Comparisons of laughter episodes across cultures, however, suggest that references to conventional British lecturer and student scripts would be out of place in many non-British contexts.

1. Introduction

Although there have been 'many calls to move away from the traditional lecture to interactive computer learning systems' (Sullivan & McIntosh, 1996: 1), the face-to-face lecture still remains the predominant method of university teaching around the world (Hodgson, 2005; Jones, 2007). In their survey of twenty-five university lecturers, Sutherland and Badger (2004: 282) found that twenty regarded the 'straightforward provision of information' as the purpose of lectures. There is evidence to suggest, however, that resources such as textbooks, handouts, online slideshows and podcasts may be more effective in this respect, because they remain accessible for a longer period of time. Cashin (1985) lists a number of weaknesses of the lecture approach, including the claim that information learnt in lectures is likely to be forgotten quickly. This seems to be confirmed by the work of McKinney, Dyck, and Luber (2009), widely discussed in the media (for example by Callaway, 2009; and Fearn, 2009), who found that students who attended a face-to-face lecture remembered significantly less of the content one week later than those who viewed the same lecture downloaded as a podcast. McKinney concluded that this was probably because the podcast group could review the lecture content again and again, paying extra attention to those parts they found most difficult.

Perhaps the face-to-face lecture endures because the physical presence of the participants offers some additional benefit beyond the simple provision of factual information. In British university courses, the lecture is often the only event where the entire cohort comes together, and it thus encourages bonding and a sense of belonging within the academic community. Many of the informants in Sutherland and Badger's survey thought that part of the lecturer's role was to generate enthusiasm (2004: 283), and Cashin (1985), Brent (2005), Hodgson (2005), and Jones (2007) have all commented on the inspirational value of the live performance, and the 'vicarious experience of relevance' (Jones, 2007: 402) which occurs when the enthusiasm of the lecturer kindles the students' interest in their subject. Additionally the ephemeral

nature of the lecture, which may make it a less than ideal medium for the transmission of dense factual information, makes it particularly suitable for the expression of personal opinion, the kind of content that is likely to be edited out of more permanent course materials. Unofficial evaluation of professional situations, or the output or behaviour of other scholars, demonstrates criticality and permits students a glimpse of the lecturer's human side. Lecturers' critical comments can 'model how professionals in a particular discipline approach a question or a problem' (Cashin, 1985), and teach students 'not to accept information or assumptions without challenging them' (Sutherland & Badger, 2004: 283). Lecturers are more likely to move beyond the straightforward delivery of factual information in a face-to-face environment, where there is less self-monitoring of behaviour, and greater opportunity to express personal attitude. Departures from the standard instructional mode in lectures are likely to be greeted by laughter, however, not necessarily because the lecturers are comic, but for a variety of other reasons discussed below.

1.1. Context

Morell (2004) distinguishes between lectures with a 'conversational style' and lectures with a 'reading style' in terms of their level of formality and the number of student interactions. The British lectures used as data in this paper are not delivered in a strictly 'reading style', as most of the lecturers maintain eye-contact with their audience for much of the time and there is little evidence of reading aloud from a pre-written paper. They do tend to be monologic, however. Audience members very rarely interrupt the speaker, and in many cases are not given any chance to speak at all. Because they have the right to hold the floor for the entire event, the lecturers tend to adhere to a plan, and are likely to know in advance what points they will have time to cover. This means that some laughter triggers can be prepared in advance, and experienced lecturers may have a repertoire of laughter provoking moves that they can draw on for their own particular purposes at appropriate stages in the lecture.

This paper aims to discover why lecturers provoke laughter, by examining recorded instances of laughter in the lecture theatre, and the contexts surrounding their occurrence. Following Wulff, Swales, and Keller (2009: 85) these contexts are defined as 'segments in which a good part of the audience laughed at least once', and are referred to as 'laughter episodes'. The length of each episode varies, but all occur within the boundaries of the lecturer's turn of talk. Most of the discussion in this paper concerns British lecturing practices. Some of the things that make the British students laugh are likely to bemuse participants with a different first language or cultural background, however, and a further purpose is therefore to identify laughter episodes in the British data which may differ from those in other cultural contexts where other lecturing practices prevail, and thus to inform the design of study skills and staff development programmes for international university environments. Laughter in lectures may be more common, and more desirable, in some cultures than in others, but participants in any academic environment may benefit from examining the affective and persuasive role of lecturer talk which in the British context commonly provokes laughter.

1.2. Literature review

Humour is often discussed in terms of one or more of the three conventional humour theories:

1) The superiority/hostility theory, that humour makes people feel stronger or more successful than others. This can be traced back to classical philosophy and to the work of Hobbes (1994 [1651/1668]). A more recent formulation of this theory is that of Gruner (1978, 1997) who argues that jokes typically have a winner (the joke-teller) and a loser (the victim of the joke).

2) The incongruity theory, that people perceive humour when something is absurdly out of place. This can be traced back to Kant (1790) and Schopenhauer (1818). Jokes must carry two different or opposing 'scripts' (Raskin, 1985), and incongruity lies in 'the clash between two registers' (Attardo, 1994: 230), but 'it is the congruous resolution of the apparent incongruity that makes a certain situation funny' (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002: 4). Bergson's view of humour in his essay "Le Rire" (1924) contains elements of both the superiority and incongruity theories, and draws attention to the role of laughter as a social act which punishes and thus corrects the anti-social acts of individuals.

3) The relief theory, that laughter provides a safety valve to release pent-up tensions. This can be traced back to the work of Freud (1905, 1928), who regarded laughter as a means of releasing suppressed thoughts about taboo subjects. Mulder and Nijholt propose a more conventional version of the theory, that 'we experience a pleasant sensation when humour replaces negative feelings like pain or sadness' (2002: 4).

Laughter in conversation seems to serve a number of social purposes, including the management of relationships and the organisation of discourse. Prior research concerning the supportive and distancing uses of laughter in conversation (for example Partington, 2006: 18) suggests that it has a supportive function when it is used to backchannel, respond, or reinforce the speakers' words, or to signal agreement, interpretation or support for the speaker, but a non-supportive function when it is used as a means of interrupting the speaker's turn or to disagree, challenge, reinterpret or contradict what the speaker has said. Joking can be supportive if it is used to claim common ground, tease, or confirm in-group identity, but it also marks social distance when it is used to indicate non-acceptance or disapproval. Wulff et al. (2009) analyse what they call 'general laughter episodes' in the discussion sections of an academic conference, where laughter is triggered by the use of exaggeration, hyperbole, banter, irony, ambiguous allusions, pratfalls, misunderstandings, jokes, funny stories, and the use of funny voices and parodies. Laughter in this context seems to strengthen the solidarity of the group; members belong to an established discourse community and share a great deal of insider knowledge, and Wulff et al comment on their use of 'secretive allusions' which 'give rise to a rather knowing kind of laughter' (2009: 86).

In his own research on the interaction in White House press briefings, Partington (2006) draws heavily on Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and the notion of face (Goffman, 1967). Face is defined as 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61) and consists of negative face (freedom of action and freedom from imposition) and positive face (the desire to be appreciated and approved of). In Partington's data, the speaker's appearance of competence is sometimes threatened by mishaps of various kinds, and when this occurs, self-deprecation or jokes can be used to provoke laughter, thereby reducing tension and generally enhancing the speaker's positive face. Partington's transcripts

are very different from lectures, not least because they are question and answer sessions rather than monologues. Laughter in press briefings may nevertheless serve some of the same purposes as laughter in lectures: the podium at the White House informs the press, maintains social order, and builds rapport in much the same way as a lecturer might manage a lecture theatre full of students. Few studies of laughter in monologue exist, and most of these focus on public speaking as opposed to lecture discourse.

Greatbatch and Clark (2003), for example, examined the speeches of ‘management gurus’, finding that laughter plays an important role in the expression of group cohesion and solidarity and heightens audience attentiveness, making the gurus’ messages more memorable. Politi (2009) used Politeness Theory to examine ‘one-sided laughter’, where only the speaker and not the audience laughs, recording the way that an experienced conference speaker used laughter to handle tricky questions, establish common ground with his audience, and enhance his positive face. The role of humour in lectures is mentioned in passing by Fillmore (1994) and its management role in classroom interaction is noted by Baynham (1996) in relation to the teasing of a student who arrives late to class, but on the whole humour in educational settings tends to have been discussed in pedagogical terms, with regard to its capacity to increase student learning and participation, rather than in sociolinguistic terms with regard to facework and the creation of social order.

Cashin (1985) claims that ‘almost every writer agrees that a certain amount of humour or personal anecdotes enhances a lecture’. Similarly, Zhang (2005: 113) draws attention to the extensive evidence from the US that humour can: enhance students’ affective learning, create an enjoyable classroom atmosphere, lessen students’ anxiety, increase affect and liking for the instructor and the course, and facilitate students’ willingness to participate in in class and out of- class communication with instructors.

Berk (1996) recommends a variety of humour techniques for lecturers to use in class, including stand-up jokes, cartoons and skits. Most of these seem to serve as entertaining additions to lectures which primarily transmit factual information, but Berk does also mention ‘self-downs’, face-saving self-deprecatory manoeuvres of the type also noted in the sociolinguistic studies of Partington (2006) and Politi (2009).

Lee’s (2006) study of laughter in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) is intended to benefit international students studying in the US who might have difficulty understanding American humour and its linguistic manifestations. Lee calculated the frequency of laughter in MICASE by using Wordsmith Tools (Scott, 1999) to search for the XML marker DESC ¼ "LAUGH". He found that the MICASE events with the most laughter tended to be interactive and dialogic, involving small groups of people in activities such as study groups, laboratory sessions and graduate seminars. Laughter was much more frequent in public lectures with invited speakers than in ordinary lectures delivered as part of a degree programme.

2. The study

This study quantifies recorded instances of laughter in lectures, and analyses the contexts surrounding these instances in an attempt to discover what kind of lecturer behaviour provokes laughter, and what purposes this may serve. Lee’s findings for the

MICASE lectures are compared primarily with those for lectures in the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus. Occasionally the discussion is also supported by examples from the Engineering Lecture Corpus (ELC), a growing collection of lectures from around the world.

The BASE corpus (1,644,942 words) is similar in size to MICASE, but whereas MICASE contains fewer examples of 15 types of speech event, the BASE corpus contains more examples of only two types of speech event: lectures and seminars. This study will focus on the lecture component of BASE, containing 160 lectures divided equally between four disciplinary groupings: Arts and Humanities, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences and Social Sciences. The BASE transcripts are freely available in two formats, plain text and XML. The XML transcripts were used for the purposes of this study so that instances of laughter could be identified by searching for the elements <vocal desc> and <shift feature>, using Wordsmith Tools.

In BASE three types of laughter are distinguished:

1. <vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y"/>, which is continuous laughter: a duration to the nearest second is always provided.
2. <vocal desc="laugh" iterated="n"/>, which is a single laugh of no discernible duration.
3. <shift feature="voice" new="laugh"/>, which marks a change in voice quality resulting in laughspeak, 'a form of blended, laughing speech that communicates emotional tone' (Provine, 2000: 37).

Laughter is further categorised according to whether it is produced by the current speaker, another individual with a unique identifier, audience members en masse ("ss"), or audience members and the current speaker ("sl"). The encoding used to express these distinctions is explained in the BASE manual (Nesi & Thompson, 2006).

The corpus query software Sketch Engine was also used for some queries. The Sketch Engine version of the corpus does not allow such fine distinctions between various types of laughter episode, but can quickly provide concordance lines for all the instances of iterated laughter (marked as [[laughter]]), and non-iterated single laughs (marked as [[laugh]]). Free access to the lecture component of the BASE corpus is available in Sketch Engine from the website <http://the.sketchengine.co.uk/open/>.

Examples of laughter episodes occurring in the Engineering Lecture Corpus were selected manually, with reference to video files as well as transcripts, as this corpus was still under development at the time of writing and had not yet been marked up for laughter.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Quantitative findings

Table 1 shows the frequencies of the different types of laughter as encoded in the XML transcripts of the lecture component of the BASE corpus. As can be seen, the commonest type of laughter is continuous and produced by more than one person - the audience ("ss") or both the audience and the lecturer ("sl"). Although 24 of the 160 lectures in the corpus contained no recorded laughter of any kind, only four lectures contained only one recorded instance of laughter. BASE lecturers often produce

laughspeak or single non-continuous laughs, and these can influence the audience's attitude towards whatever is being said (Partington, 2006:18), and thus often encourage audience laughter in response. Most student laughter is choral and continuous, confirming the sociological principle that people prefer to act like those around them (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003: 1520). Of course, this raises quantification issues, because in particularly laughter-filled lectures one instance of laughter merges into the next. The following frequency tables must therefore be considered with caution; they do not take account of the volume or duration of each recorded instance of laughter, or how closely these instances clustered together.

Lecturer laughter	No. in lecture component
<vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" dur="1"/> etc.	202
<vocal desc="laugh" iterated="n"/>	293
<shift feature="voice" new="laugh"/>	608
Audience laughter	No. in lecture component
<vocal desc="laugh" iterated="n" n="ss"/>	6
<vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="ss" or "sl".../>	860
<vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="(individual)"/>	32

Table 1: Figures for different types of laughter in BASE lectures

Table 2 shows the frequency of all recorded instances of laughter across the four disciplinary groupings: Arts and Humanities, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences and Social Sciences. Figures have been normalised to 10,000 words, as although there were equal quantities of lectures in each grouping, the total number of words varies. It can be seen that recorded instances of laughter are commonest in the Social Sciences, and least common in the Physical Sciences.

	Total words	'laugh' and 'laughter'	Normalised to 10,000	Number of lectures
Arts and Humanities	651,410	306	4.7	33/40
Life Sciences	616,752	636	10.3	31/40
Physical Sciences	605,984	226	3.7	36/40
Social Sciences	772,774	833	10.8	36/40
Total	2,646,920	2001	7.6	136/160

Table 2: Combined figures for the number of times 'laugh' and 'laughter' were recorded in BASE lectures in the four disciplinary groupings

The proportion of lectures containing recorded instances of laughter was similar for BASE (136 lectures, 85%) and MICASE (54 lectures, 87%). There was, however, an average of one recorded instance of laughter every 1.4 min across the entire lecture component of the BASE corpus, whereas in the MICASE lectures laughter was recorded on average every 5min (Lee, 2006: 54). It is possible that this variation is due to differences in recording or mark-up practices during the compilation of the two corpora. However, laughter is marked up much more frequently in some small group speech events in MICASE than in BASE seminars (see Table 4), and laughter in MICASE colloquia (public lectures) is recorded with similar frequency to laughter in the BASE lectures (on average once every 2 min, according to Lee, 2006: 54). This suggests that the variation in the frequency of laughter in lectures is indicative of generic differences between the British and American speech events, rather than differences in the use of recording equipment, or the transcribers' zeal. In the BASE lectures the constraints on allowable contributions from the floor seem to be more severe, which probably means that the British lecturers have more opportunity to map out the course of the lecture in advance and semi-script their performance, in the manner of a public speaker. Also the design of British degree programmes may result

in lower levels of familiarity between participants which might in turn prompt some lecturers to use more rapport-building strategies. British universities tend to distinguish between lectures where the lecturer does most of the talking and the students are in larger groups, and smaller classes where the students are expected to do most of the talking, in discussion or through oral presentations (Nesi, 2001). Small classes such as this are called ‘seminars’ in the BASE corpus. British academics who only deliver lectures and do not lead seminars may have little personal contact with the majority of their students, and likewise the students themselves may not know other lecture participants who do not attend their seminar group. MICASE lecturers often address students by name, but this is rare in BASE.

Table 3 excludes ‘one-sided’ laughter episodes where only the lecturer laughs. According to these figures, one or more audience member laughed on average every 3.2 min. A comparison of Tables 2 and 3 shows that in nine lectures, only the lecturer laughed. This was particularly common in the Physical Sciences.

	Total words	s/ss/sl laugh* tags	Normalised to 10,000	Number of lectures
Arts and Humanities	651,410	104	1.6	31/40
Life Sciences	616,752	378	6.1	31/40
Physical Sciences	605,984	73	1.2	30/40
Social Sciences	772,774	343	4.4	35/40
<i>Total</i>	2,646,920	898	3.4	127/160

Table 3: Audience laughter in BASE lectures

Table 4 contrasts the findings recorded in Table 2 with those for the seminar component of the BASE corpus. Once again, events in the Life Sciences and Social Sciences contain much more laughter than events in the Arts and Humanities and the Physical Sciences, but in seminars recorded instances of laughter are generally rarer, occurring on average only about once every 15 min. More than half the seminars contain no recorded instances at all.

	Total words	'laugh' and 'laughter'	Normalised to 10,000	Number of seminars
Arts and Humanities	148,985	18	1.2	2/10
Life Sciences	145,822	83	5.7	3/10
Physical Sciences	81,580	11	1.3	3/09
Social Sciences	120,838	70	5.8	8/10
<i>Total</i>	497,225	182	3.7	16/39

Table 4: Total incidence of ‘laugh’ and ‘laughter’ in BASE seminars

The relative rarity of laughter in BASE seminars contrasts with Lee’s finding that small groups in MICASE tended to produce more laughter (2006:54), and again suggests generic differences between the sessions marked as ‘seminars’ in BASE and their nearest equivalents in MICASE (seminars, student presentations and discussion sections, all of which evoke laughter once or twice every 3 min on average). Any comparison of ‘seminar’ discourse must be treated with caution, however, because what constitutes a seminar varies greatly from course to course and from discipline to discipline. In the BASE corpus the small group sessions described as seminars may include discussions, question and answer sessions, team activities and/or student presentations.

3.2. Qualitative findings

Lecturer laughter in BASE often comes at the end of an articulatory phrase (a sequence of speech which is not interrupted by a pause), and thus commonly co-occurs with a pause marker. This suggests that the lecturers do not make students

laugh unwittingly – they invite laughter through the use of techniques which enable them to indicate that it is appropriate to laugh. The management of laughter is strategic, as will be shown in the discussion that follows.

For this study the contexts surrounding marked up instances of laughter in the BASE lecture transcripts were examined for evidence to suggest the purpose of laughter, and the methods lecturers used to provoke it. This eventually led to the identification of six broad types of laughter-provoking behaviour, linked to four broad functions, associated with facework, social management and anxiety management, as shown in Table 5. The typology was constructed inductively from the data, rather than being modelled on categorizations from the prior literature. An interpretation of function must always depend on context, and some recorded instances of laughter in the corpus were impossible to interpret and were not assigned to any of the six categories, because the available contextual information was insufficient. Moreover the six categories are not mutually exclusive and sometimes co-occur, as is evident from the examples below.

Episode types:	Episode functions:			
	Maintenance of social order	Rapport building	Release from tension/anxiety	Modelling and reinforcing academic/professional identity
Lecturer-student teasing	✓	✓	✓	
Lecturer error	✓	✓	✓	
Lecturer self-deprecation		✓		
Black humour			✓	✓
Disparagement of out-group members	✓	✓		✓
Register and word play	✓	✓		

Table 5: Types of laughter episodes and their functions in BASE lectures

Extracts 1, 2 and 3 are instances of lecturer-student teasing, used in the BASE lectures as a form of social control. Misbehaviour on the part of students (mostly late-coming and laziness) threatens the lecturer's 'competence' face. The role of teasing in dealing with misbehaviour is explained by Fine and de Soucey (2005: 11):

the member who has violated group expectations is reprimanded, but because the frame is a joking one, there is formally no criticism; the reputation remains formally unsmudged: this is, after all, only 'joking'.

Bald-on-record insults also provide a means of asserting intimacy, and implying bonds that may not really exist (Partington, 2006: 144). The greater the insult, the less likely it is to be taken seriously. Lecturers therefore tend to exaggerate the culprits' misbehaviour and in so doing also flatter them by showing how they conform to a widely-accepted 'student' script involving partying, boozing, and not working hard.

Extract 1. Lecturer-student teasing (LSlec030)

for example in a medical student liver being constantly abused by alcohol scarred collagen is busily being deposited in that gentleman up there who's <laughter> busy partying every night and that can result in impaired liver function.

Extract 2. Lecturer-student teasing (AHlec033)

hello (anonymised) recovered from your hangover leaving the union at two o'clock in the morning <laughter> yes yes <laughter> very good and it's only taken you till two o'clock the next day that's fantastic <laughter>

In Extract 2, the use of a first name (anonymised in the transcript) as a positive politeness strategy when a student arrives late to the lecture helps to defuse a potentially face-threatening act still further. It is of course unlikely that the lecturer is really in a position to know whether the student in question actually did party until two in the morning, or lie in bed with a hangover until two the next day.

The lecturer in Extract 3 may be gratifying the students' desire not to appear to be working very hard. According to Fox (2004) this desire is one of the foremost characteristics of English culture.

Extract 3. Lecturer-student teasing (AHlec021)

you need to take it seriously that's one one-quarter of this year's work if you like so of all your how many hours do you work in a week? probably fifty-two fifty-three i guess thirty-two twenty well whatever it <laughter> is.

Usually outsiders cannot readily understand in-group jokes, as Fine and de Soucey (2005) point out, but teasing in BASE lecture transcripts will be comprehensible to most British readers and does not require any special shared knowledge, because of its dependence on the 'student' script. It is possible that such teasing might exclude some non-British members of the audience, but if this is the case it will be because they do not share the same student script, rather than because they are not privy to intimate information concerning their fellow-students. Although teasing of a similar nature occurs in MICASE, the American "student" script is rather different. MICASE lecturers tease their students about falling asleep, talking in class, or not knowing the correct answers to questions, but there are no references whatsoever to alcohol, which is a frequent trigger for laughter in BASE, as in Extracts 1 and 2. In Michigan the legal age to drink alcohol is 21. References to students falling asleep seem widespread across cultures, as Extracts 4 and 5 from the Engineering Lecture Corpus (ELC) show (from New Zealand and Malaysia respectively).

Extract 4. New Zealand Lecturer-student teasing (NZSolidMec001)

right everyone happy or asleep Monday morning wakey wakey

Extract 5. Malaysian Lecturer-student teasing (MMec001)

if it is too comfortable then perhaps half of the class will be falling asleep

Extracts 6 and 7 show laughter in the context of lecturers' mistakes. The mismatch between the conventional lecture 'script' and the unexpected error is incongruous; the lecturer's competence face is threatened, and laughter is used to release the resulting tension, both on the part of the lecturer, who by laughing indicates that the mishap is not serious, and the students, who by laughing indicate their allegiance with the lecturer. In some cases, as in Extract 6, the lecturer 'adopts a bumbling persona' (Partington, 2006: 94). This serves the dual function of appealing for audience sympathy and implying that 'this is not the speaker's true, normal behaviour'.

Extract 6. Lecturer error (AHlec033)

Benjamin Franklin was it was wasn't it <inaudible> you're absolutely <laughter> right oh my goodness <laughter> that's why none of us knew it i think <laughter> that's very true or i could have bluffed my whole way through here <laughter> and you could have got a degree from a university and gone out with a completely false

piece of knowledge <laughter> couldn't i absolutely right Benjamin Franklin this is the this is the example gets used in all the books as well so it shows how carefully I've been reading things <laughter> Benjamin Franklin indeed was the inventor of the bifocals.

Extract 7. Lecturer error (LSlec017)

I thought probably what I'd do is start with a single equation and this is the only equation you're going to see in this lecture and it's on the board there now now what does that tell you does it look even vaguely familiar to anyone <laughter> no I've probably got it wrong I thought it was something like the equation of relativity.

Lecturer self-deprecation also adheres to the 'script' of university life. As in Extracts 6 and 7, the lecturer may play the role of a bumbling, ageing incompetent, yet in so doing also sometimes manages to imply the opposite. Thus self-deprecation serves to signal modesty and approachability. In Extract 8, it also appears to simultaneously serve the contradictory purpose of self-aggrandisement.

Extract 8. Lecturer self-deprecation (LSlec020)

I was informed by one of my colleagues at the beginning the longer the title that you have in the university is usually correlates with your lesser importance <laughter> in the university so I've got this grand title of being Director of G-P Undergraduate Medical Education <laughter>

Self-deprecation is also mentioned as a laughter trigger by Lee (2006: 57) and by Lee and Gunesequera (2004) who cite Bosrock (1999) in support of their claim that self-deprecation is a typical feature of American humour. The following examples from BASE, MICASE and the New Zealand component of ELC all feature a typical self-deprecatory topic: lecturer hair loss.

Extract 9. Lecturer self-deprecation (LSlec033)

when we become consultant lecturers we don't do things at last-minute-dot-com we do we're no more organized than you are we're just a bit older have a bit less hair <laughter>

Extract 10. US lecturer self-deprecation (LES220SU140)

i don't know about you but I look exactly the same as when I did when I was little, <LAUGH> so it'd be really easy to tell. well I have less hair than I, than (I did then.) <LAUGH>

Extract 11. New Zealand lecturer self-deprecation (NZElec001)

those of you who are lucky enough to have hair when you comb you hair in the morning on a dry day what you find is that sometimes the hair sticks to the comb that happens have you ever had that I've got fond memories of that happening <laughter>

The type of episode I have labelled 'black humour' is particularly common in the BASE Life Sciences and allows the lecturer to deal with topics that are important to the discipline, but socially taboo. In Extracts 12 and 13, laughter clearly serves to release tension and manage embarrassment, but also helps to reinforce the participants' professional identity. In these contexts the lecturers are modelling the

behaviour of members of their discipline, and distinguishing between lecture participants and ordinary members of the public.

Extract 12. Black humour (LSlec033)

so my advice to you is as soon as you get on the surgical ward start putting your fingers up people's bottoms just get used to it you know <laughter> all doctors have to be able to do it and er and you're no different and just get over that mental barrier.

Extract 13. Black humour (LSlec018)

Of course what you'd like to do is to walk into a classroom at the age of children at the age of five and say right all those of you who are going to use intravenous drugs when you're older <laughter> and have more than five sexual partners a year could you please put your hand up and we'll vaccinate you

Extract 14, from MICASE, is remarkably similar to Extract 13:

Extract 14. US black humour (lel500su088)

what you really wanna do, is take some people, knock out their serotonin neurons give them L-S-D and see if they and ask them if they hallucinate. <LAUGH>

The disparagement of out-group members helps to bond participants and reinforce in-group identity. In addition to its bonding function, casting someone else as the outsider can foster a sense of superiority, and bolster the competence face of lecturers who possess privileged information about important figures in their field. Extracts 15 and 16 are both parts of longer anecdotes which critique bad professional behaviour. In Extract 15 the speaker strongly criticises the lecturing skills of a famous historian. Laughter is triggered by the unexpected revelation that the historian's lecture was bad, and also by the speaker's self-deprecatory attitude towards his own lectures ('i know you've experienced a few') which are nevertheless presented as being superior to those of the famous historian.

Extract 15. Disparagement (AHlec028)

this story it's completely true I I went to this lecture it's now about eighteen months ago which was the worst lecture by a historian I have ever seen in my <laugh> entire life I know you've experienced a few <laughter> you think but I tell you this was stellar this was absolutely stellar and it was by someone who's widely believed to be one of the greatest historians in practising today and because he was you know a great man enormous quantities of people were there it was in the senate house in of every historian you've ever read i think who's still alive was there watching this thing ...

In Extract 16 the lecturer provokes laughter by revealing the unprofessional behaviour of a senior doctor who failed to support him when he was a junior doctor, and who turned up drunk at the hospital. The lecturer also plays with register, making a joking reference to alcohol abuse as in the teasing episodes, Extracts 1 and 2.

Extract 16. Disparagement (LSlec033)

I I'd never ever put a er er a peritoneal dialysis catheter into anybody and a patient came in very sick with acute renal failure over the full monty and I rang him and he said oh (anonymised) er just pop a catheter in <laughter> and I said but I've never done one sir actually we did use to call the bosses sir in the bad old days and er he

said oh get the nurses to talk talk you through it <laughter> and I say well I I really don't think that's a good idea sir you know I think I think you'd better come in and supervise he said oh all right all right then and he just sort of had another port and came in <laughter> pissed out of his head.

Finally, BASE lectures contain a certain amount of laughter in response to the resolution of incongruity in register, and the solving of word play puzzles. This may have a social management role; Lee (2006: 64) sees similar episodes in MICASE as serving to break the ice in lectures and build rapport. The use of an informal word in an otherwise formal context (traditional bathos), as in Extract 17, might also be an attempt to bolster the lecturer's positive face by creating the impression of unstuffiness and spontaneity.

Extract 17. Register (AHlec020)

firing as they go basically frightening the shit out of the <laughter> the enemy

The resolution of the puzzles contained in other more complex types of word play serves to gratify the audience by making them feel superior. Deciphering the humour in Extracts 18 and 19 requires close attention to the words and some linguistic skill. In Extract 18 the joke centres around the double meaning of 'screening', which can be used metaphorically to refer to a process of filtering people or data ('screening questions' enable a researcher to identify suitable research participants), but which can also refer to the presentation of a film (on a screen). In Extract 19 the joke centres around the lecturer's mnemonic for identifying the four universal features of life. Although the names for these features are all supposed to begin with the letter F ('the four Fs') the first word actually begins with PH ('photosynthesis'), and a more polite alternative ('mating') is substituted for the fourth. Thus Extract 19 also plays with register by implying a taboo word, and employs the shock tactics of black humour.

Extract 18. Word play (SSlec002)

so you need to ask screening questions to find out and quite often you'll you may have come across this you'll get stopped in the street and someone will say you know have you been to the cinema in the last six months if you say no they say right thanks very much goodbye that's a it's a screening question <laughter>

Extract 19. Word play (LSlec009)

well what i call the four Fs photosynthesis sorry about that flight fur fur on plants fur on bumblebees fur on mammals and mating <laughter>

Table 5

4. Pedagogical implications

Laughter in lectures is clearly not just an outcome of add-on entertainment sections, of the kind advocated by Berk (1996). Lecturers provoke laughter for multiple purposes, as a means of controlling students, showing them how they should and should not behave, and making them feel part of a professional/academic community.

These methods are culture-specific, however. In some countries any use of laughter may be deemed inappropriate for the lecture theatre. Zhang (2005), for example, cites

a large body of US research to show that instructors' use of humour reduces students' anxiety, boosts learning, and increases willingness to participate, but also finds in a survey of 176 undergraduates in central China that 'perceived instructor humour orientation' exacerbates students' fear of participating in class. Zhang concludes that humour makes Chinese students feel uncomfortable, because it 'highlights individual attention and deviation from the group'. She argues that 'individualistic people are more likely to employ humour to cope with stress and anxiety than are collectivist people' (2005: 114).

Laughter episodes in lectures may also be less common in countries where English is used as a medium of university instruction but is spoken as a second or foreign language, because lecturers who deliver the information content of their lectures in English tend to revert to their first language for other social and class management purposes. Flowerdew, Li, & Miller (1998), for example, report that many of their Hong Kong Chinese lecturer interviewees abandoned English when they wanted to reduce the distance between themselves and their students: 'for instance, we can crack jokes in colloquial Cantonese' (1998: 224).

The Malaysian component of the Engineering Lecture Corpus contains laughter resulting from teasing and black humour, but little laughter surrounding lecturer error, self-deprecation, or disparagement of other professionals. The power differential between lecturers and students renders this type of laughter inappropriate. Register and word play laughter triggers are also rarely used, because students are not attuned to register variation, and because the Malaysian participants, like those from Hong Kong, prefer to use their own L1 for language play.

Lectures produced in different contexts are likely to display differences in the frequency and type of laughter episodes, even when they share the same L1. BASE lecturers adopt many of the same techniques as MICASE lecturers, who according to Lee (2006: 64) use 'self-effacement, in-jokes sarcasm, wit [and] references to contemporary or youth culture' to demonstrate their individualism. MICASE lecturers never refer to alcohol and drunkenness to provoke laughter, however, and maintain the 'agreeable tenor' of Midwest speech noted by Swales (2004: 273). Mauranen's American academic informants explain that 'you don't (present) direct criticism. anything less than enthusiasm is critical' (2002). BASE lecturers on the other hand seem less enthusiastic and more prone to indulge in critical gossip, although this is always at the expense of outsiders, and criticism of students is softened by means of teasing. The uses of laughter in lectures vary across disciplines and universities as well as across nations. There is much more laughter in BASE Social Science lectures than in BASE Physical Science lectures, for example, and a comparison of BASE engineering lectures (recorded at the Warwick University) and the British component of the Engineering Lecture Corpus (recorded at Coventry University) is also starting to reveal interesting institutional differences in lecturing style.

These differences obviously have implications for lecturers who travel from one cultural environment to another. Those coming from contexts which make less use of laughter in lectures might sensibly opt to keep their lectures laughter-free, as about 15% of BASE and MICASE lecturers do. British or American lecturers may be advised to modify their style, however, when lecturing in ESL environments, or to international students.

Lee (2006: 50) quotes an advanced ESL graduate at the University of Michigan as saying 'I understand everything that goes on in class except when everybody laughs'. Clearly laughter episodes in lectures can place particular demands on international students, both linguistically, if the lecturer makes puns or departs from the normal academic register, and culturally, if the lecturer draws on unfamiliar scripts, refers to taboo topics or alters the expected power and distance differentials. International students may be bewildered by the British scripts for the self-deprecating lecturer and the hard-drinking, party-loving student, for example, especially as these are in fact only playful roles which lecture participants are supposed to enjoy, but not seriously believe. There is perhaps scope for the inclusion of such scripts in pre-sessional programmes, but this will require sensitivity and ingenuity on the part of the EAP practitioner - laughter episodes do not feature in the mock lectures, spoken by actors, which are often used in EAP listening materials, and some types of laughter episode such as teasing tend to be absent from authentic listening materials recorded in other contexts, such as the guest or celebrity lecture delivered to an invited audience.

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed some of the contexts in which laughter occurs in the lecture component of the BASE corpus, and has also referred to instances of laughter recorded in MICASE and the Engineering Lecture Corpus (ELC). Laughter was seen to be used to maintain social order, build rapport, relieve tension, and model academic and professional identities. These functions do not constitute an exhaustive list, however; lecturers are individual and ingenious in the ways that they interact with their students, and readers will doubtless have their own memories of different types of laughter episodes to add to the examples provided here.

The paper also draws attention to problems of transferability from one lecturing context to another. Most EAP programmes doubtless offer many opportunities for rapport-building through laughter, but this is unlikely to prepare international students for the highly culture-specific uses of laughter in many departmental settings, and could be usefully supplemented with more explicit training, especially in relation to shared cultural scripts.

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The Engineering Lecture Corpus (ELC) is under development at Coventry University. The project is directed by Hilary Nesi with funding from the British Council (RC 90). www.coventry.ac.uk/elc.

The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) was developed by researchers and students at the English Language Institute at the University of

Michigan in Ann Arbor (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 2002). The corpus is available from <http://micase.elicorpora.info/>.

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